

AFTER THE SYRIAN FIREWORKS

The Powers Inflate a Local Dispute

RAY ALAN

THERE was a time, not long ago, when a crack Arab fighting force used to parade beneath my balcony in a Middle Eastern capital once a week to rehearse its second round against Israel. Headed by a goat and a military band, it marched off through a crowded market square, banners flying and arms at the ready, and then headed for a pleasant little valley three or four miles out of town.

Here, after a suitable rest, and an hour of crawling and shouting into radio sets, fires were lit, lunch was eaten, and coffee brewed. The afternoon was given over to smoking, pep-talks, and sometimes singing. At last, just sufficiently disheveled, the force would return, almost too weary to acknowledge the admiring exclamations of the market square crowd. Merchants consoled one another with the thought that there was at least something to show for the new military tax. Visiting firemen who caught the parade dashed off solemn cables about the new spirit of militancy animating the Arab world.

The same kind of show was being put on daily in the five main cities of Syria in late October and early November. In Damascus, military bands, troops, and flag-waving demonstrators marched through the streets, recruiting volunteers and rounding up idlers for trench-digging on the outskirts of the capital. Non-cooperation, said officially inspired rumors, would mean a fine and may-

be a loyalty check. The Beirut road, in particular—a vast tree-lined boulevard laid down under the French Mandate administration before 1945—was a blood-chilling early-morning sight, as what looked like an irresistible revolutionary mob swarmed along it, cheering and chanting slogans and waving pickaxes, hatchets, and clubs. Armed, steel-helmeted troops escorted them, while officers flashed about in jeeps and command cars, consulting their map cases with an important air.

Once outside the city, the mob melted away into gardens and groves and over hill-tops. Officers gravitated discreetly toward the open-air cafés along the banks of the streams that come together here to form the fast-flowing Barada. Only occasional pairs of stiff, self-important civilians, wearing armbands and carrying what looked like home-made sub-machine guns—members of the recently formed People's Resistance Movement—maintained something like a purposeful air, enjoying their new status. But after three or four hours those trench-diggers who had not quietly spirited themselves away were rounded up for a return march into the city. Drums would roll again, uniformed motorcyclists would clear the boulevard, and crowds turned out to cheer the gallant band, itself more subdued now.

When marching and digging began to pall, mock air raids were staged. Soviet-supplied Migs screamed down over rooftops and minarets, coming upon Damascus with startling suddenness from beyond the barren, tawny bulk of the Jebel Kassiu mountain range. Jebel Kassiu is to the north, like Turkey. Anti-aircraft batteries fired blanks; fire engines, ambulances, and motorcyclists screamed and roared around the city; and, comically incongruous, officially sponsored

THE Eisenhower Doctrine seems to have been the chief casualty of the recent turmoil brought about by Russian and Syrian charges against Turkey and by the resulting war scare. RAY ALAN, a veteran observer of Middle Eastern affairs whose first-hand reports from the area have frequently appeared in COMMENTARY, examines the Syrian situation in its international political context.

demonstrations—complete with drum-pounding, dancing Bedouins who slashed at the sky with daggers and rifles—jammed the little square in front of army headquarters, and then paraded through the streets chanting “defense-drive” slogans.

The basic slogans were commonplace enough: They had been intoned and repeated for weeks. Drivers hooted to their rhythm and cyclists tinkled them out on their bells. “Down with imperialism! Down with Eisenhower! Long live the army!” Slightly more recent was “Down with Turkey!” But there was one brand-new one, a tentative free-lance effort that in its modest way was probably the most significant of the lot: “*Yaesh* [long live] *es-Sputnik*!”

SYRIA’S pro-Soviet (but not avowedly Communist) commander-in-chief, General Afif Bizri, has stoked and fanned the hot coals of war psychosis in every Syrian city with the skill of a Damascene smith heating his forge. Even after the UN debate on Syria’s complaint against Turkey had fizzled out, General Bizri announced “continued Turkish violations” of Syrian air space, and warned: “The imperialists are still massing invasion forces for the purpose of destroying our independence. We must remain armed and alert and . . . make Syria a land of fire to scorch the aggressors.” Meanwhile his brother, the overtly Communist Colonel Salah Bizri, commander of the civilian People’s Resistance Movement, was still, early in November, distributing arms to his adherents and warning them to be ready for action at short notice.

The PRM is stated by informed Syrians to be organized “in cells”—but Syrians love conspiratorial terminology, and what they probably mean by cells is small, self-sufficient units. Their role is to collaborate closely with the army in times of crisis, especially in the maintenance of public security, and to go underground in the event of a successful invasion or internal coup. A high proportion of the arms are stated to be held in secret caches known only to “cell” leaders reportedly trained in sabotage and guerrilla

tactics by non-Russian Soviet-bloc instructors. Total effectives have been put by Syrians sympathetic to the movement at more than 25,000, but something nearer 8,000 (the estimated strength of the Syrian Communist party) would seem a likelier figure: Syrian parties and movements have a habit of multiplying themselves by three.

The presence of a substantial sprinkling of armed civilians throughout the country inevitably heightens the public’s excited—and on the whole, rather delighted—sense that Syria is living dangerously, even heroically, and the war psychosis is further fed by the government-controlled press and radio which daily compete in the fabrication of plots and military maneuverings, and in glamorizing the armed forces. The forces themselves contribute by their ubiquity. Except in the more remote villages, truckloads of troops, barbed wire, and sentries are now inescapable features of the Syrian landscape.

President Shukri el-Kuwatli’s return in 1955 (he had been deposed by an army coup in 1949) was welcomed even by some of his opponents as marking the end of a dreary succession of military dictatorships and offering the prospect of a more or less constitutional regime in which the army would be kept in its place. But although a civilian government now holds nominal power, the army is once more in control, its officers as privileged and pampered as in Colonel Shishakli’s day; and despite the existence of a freely elected parliament—the first in Syria’s history—the political atmosphere is no freer than when Shishakli was dictator.* The ill-shaven ferret-faced little men who came to symbolize the Shishakli regime are once more installed in every café, hotel, and public gathering, to tail journalists and foreigners, keep an eye on their contacts, and listen in to casual conversation. Residents of Damascus say that the new secret police organization is even better supplied with funds than Shishakli’s *Sûreté* (whose annual budget

*See this author’s “Palace Politics in the Damascus Oasis,” *COMMENTARY*, February 1953.

amounted to seven dollars per head of the adult population) and both more efficient and more influential. The old *Sûreté* was despised, as well as mistrusted, by most army officers, whereas the present secret police is subordinate to the army's intelligence office.

The new set-up is not, however, wholly frictionless. The military intelligence network, as the remotest Eskimo knows by now, is headed by a fast-rising thirty-five-year-old officer, Colonel Abdel Hamid Serraj, who is credited in Damascus with personal ambitions more or less *à la* Shishakli; he is, moreover, more sympathetically inclined to the "National Socialist" Ba'ath party, headed by Akram Haurani, than to the Bizri brothers' Communist friends—possibly because he prefers to ally himself with a party he can manipulate rather than one which would always be trying to manipulate him. At the end of August there was open disagreement between Ba'ath and Communist senior officers over a list of postings which the former feared would eliminate a number of their adherents from key appointments. But the possibilities of serious discord should not be exaggerated: it would certainly be unwise to hinge future Western policy toward Syria (as some Lebanese officials advise) on an early split within the junta. The Bizris and Serraj, and their respective civilian allies, have more in common with each other than either group with any other potential partner; and they are sufficiently intelligent to realize that a rift could bring disaster upon them all.

BUT for the efficient Serraj's loyalty to the Ba'ath-Communist alliance, General Bizri would not today be chief of staff. His predecessor, General Tawfiq Nizameddin, a fairly wealthy landowner, had been appointed (under Egyptian pressure) in July 1956 to facilitate the establishment of Colonel Nasser's much advertised Egyptian-Syrian joint command. Nizameddin was pro-Nasser and anti-Western, but in March this year, alarmed by the spread of Ba'ath and Communist intrigues in the army, he ordered the transfer of more than 100 "left-wing" offi-

cers, including Serraj, to less important posts. The cabinet—alerted by Ba'ath leader Akram Haurani and Defense Minister Khaled el Azm, the "fellow-traveling millionaire"—overruled him, but failed to carry a Ba'ath-sponsored motion for Nizameddin's dismissal. Shortly afterward (Syrian "leftists" now allege) Nizameddin began conspiring with like-minded officers and Syrian political exiles in Beirut, with a view to purging the army and the government of Ba'ath-Communist influence. Accounts of his nominal chief's conspiracy began to reach Serraj in June. Simultaneously reports were coming in from Baghdad and Amman of a new Hashemite plan to sort out Syria's affairs. Then his operatives got onto a trail which allegedly led to the U.S. Embassy. Serraj alerted his "leftist" army colleagues and the Defense Minister, Khaled el Azm, and it was agreed that Nizameddin should be replaced by Afif Bizri, then a colonel in charge of the *Premier Bureau* (administration and personnel), who had pleased the "left" and shocked everyone else, by his severity as head of the military tribunal that tried forty-seven "pro-Western" plotters last winter. El Azm took Nizameddin to Moscow with him to discuss Soviet aid to Syria, and at once Bizri moved into the chief of staff's office. Colonel (now General) Amin Nafouri, only recently won over to the attractions of fellow-traveling, accompanied him as deputy chief of staff.

On his return from Moscow, General Nizameddin not unnaturally refused to accept this *fait accompli*. Cunningly, Serraj left him at liberty just long enough for him to summon the aid of the unit commanders who had previously pledged their support against the Ba'ath-Communist coalition: then the whole lot were put in the bag, and three U.S. officials expelled for good measure. A few days later a new director of police, seven new regional gendarmerie commanders, and sixteen new judges were appointed. The "leftist" junta now controlled all the levers of power. Early in September, as if to underline the fact, its gendarmerie and police rounded up some two hundred

civilian "undesirables." The Syrian state radio—secretly under "leftist" control even in Shishakli's day—launched a violent campaign of abuse against Jordan's King Hussein. And then trouble flared up on the Syrian-Turkish border.

THE border runs through one of the most fascinating parts of the Near East. For more than two hundred miles it is marked only by a single-track railroad. North and west of Aleppo, in the wild, fragrant Kurd Dagh (Kurdish Mountain), it is not marked at all. The tall, fair-complexioned border villagers are mainly Kurdish-speaking, with little sense of allegiance to Turkey or Syria, and chiefly devoted to smuggling. The Turkish and Arab customs men and gendarmes whom Ankara and Damascus station in the main frontier villages, on the other hand, tend to despise one another and get a fair amount of pleasure out of arresting and counter-arresting each other's protégés, and confiscating straying flocks. Civilization, if they represent it, is here a corrupting and disruptive force. But it is unusual for their feuds to have wider than local repercussions.

The trouble on the border this fall was that it suited so many interested parties to have a crisis there. The Kremlin was only too happy to pose as the defender of Arab freedom and neutralism against aggressive NATO encroachments. On the Turkish side, M. Adnan Menderes, busy organizing his party's return in the elections, was grateful for an excuse to tighten up "internal security" measures and maroon as many junior officers as possible in remote outposts: Turkish officers tend to support the opposition Republican party, and in some garrison towns had already facilitated the holding of anti-Menderes meetings which the civil authorities were under orders to discourage. Lastly, to the Damascus junta the crisis provided a heaven-sent opportunity to rally both Syrian and regional opinion in its favor.

The Syrian "leftist" leaders seem nonetheless to have been quite genuinely scared by the trend of events during much of September. As the month opened they con-

fidently scoffed at a rumored Hashemite partition plan for Syria (whereby Turkey, as well as Iraq and Jordan, were expected to benefit). They were not, at first, unduly disturbed by the rather rash remarks attributed to the State Department's Levant-hopping Under Secretary Loy Henderson and his chief in Washington—where it was officially hoped that "the people of Syria would act to allay the anxiety caused by recent events." But it soon became apparent that unusually massive NATO maneuvers were being prepared in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Syrian intelligence officers appear to have extracted from commuting Kurds alarming accounts of Turkish troop movements between Adana and Urfa. An embryonic "shadow cabinet" of Syrian political exiles met in an American-owned hotel in Istanbul. American planes began airlifting arms into Jordan—whose government-operated radio was urging Syrians to declare a "holy war" on Bizri and Serraj. And Turkey's ally Iraq suddenly dispatched an armored brigade to Syria's southeastern frontier. Even so, one is bound to suspect that Soviet prompting outweighed all these factors in determining the Syrian junta's subsequent conduct.

On the Turkish side of the border there was alarm, too, for a short while. M. Menderes was not greatly afraid of the Russians, had in fact approved a few measures to ease relations with them during the summer, and did not even reinforce his eastern garrison (or so sources favorable to him claim). His guess (say these same sources) is that if ever the Russians do plump for a showdown they will lunge straight for North America and Britain, instead of losing the initiative in time-wasting peripheral squabbles. But he did see cause for apprehension in Syrian irresponsibility, the more so since the recovery of Iskenderon (formerly Alexandretta, acquired by Turkey shortly before 1939) figures prominently among the "national aspirations" not only of the governing Ba'ath-Communist coalition, but of the sole significant opposition group, the Hesb esh-Shaab (People's party). The Shaabists are

particularly strong in Aleppo, where there is a substantial community of Arab Christian and Armenian refugees who fled Alexandretta when the Turks moved in, and where the junta urgently needs to increase its following. Might not the junta be tempted to make a bid for glory in Syrian and pan-Arab eyes by seizing Iskenderon in a surprise attack, relying on Soviet-bloc and neutralist votes at the UN to obtain an early ceasefire and standstill agreement? The fact that the Turks received Iskenderon and its hinterland (subsequently renamed Hatay), after a highly dubious "popular consultation," as a gift from "colonialist" France (in order to keep them out of Italo-German arms) would strengthen Syria's claim for its return in the eyes of many UN delegations. It has been suggested in Beirut that Jordanian officials may have supplied the Turks with evidence of some such Syrian plan, so as to win a respite from Syrian-sponsored propaganda attacks and subversion for the perennially harassed King Hussein.

THE United States government had stuck a foot in the crisis well in advance—as early as September 7—by voicing its "concern," and that of Syria's neighbors ("Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, and to some extent Saudi-Arabia"), over developments in Damascus. It had followed this up by rattling hardware in Amman. The reaction of the Arab masses, endemically suspicious of the West, was to lend readier ears than ever to Syrian, Soviet, and Egyptian propaganda charges against the U.S.—although Washington was in fact urging the Turks to avoid any action that might be construed as "provocative." Arab leaders suspected of collaboration with America panicked and fell over one another in their rush to dissociate themselves both from U.S. policy on Syria (whatever it might be: not even U.S. diplomatic circles really knew) and from the Eisenhower Doctrine. Never had a house of cards collapsed so swiftly.

Leading all others, President Eisenhower's noble friend King Saud gave the U.S. a truly majestic box on the ear. One: "Syria

cannot possibly be considered a source of concern, let alone danger, to her neighbors since her policy is based on the Arab League and the UN Charter." Two: "It is quite false to allege that Saudi-Arabia has ever adhered to the Eisenhower Doctrine." The Lebanese government, more scrupulous, declared that it wished to redraft its assent to the Eisenhower Doctrine, its parliamentary foreign affairs commission having decided that Lebanon would *not* fight "international Communism" after all; but it, too, insulted the U.S. government by publicly requesting "assurances that America will not use force in Syria"—which suggested that, in its view, Soviet-Syrian propaganda allegations might be true. The Jordanian government, having taken delivery of America's emergency arms supply, publicly "regretted" the somewhat blatant manner in which the arms had been flown in, stressed that they would not be used against Syria, but might come in handy against Israel, and announced that it, too, was contracting out of the Eisenhower Doctrine (though vague assurances in a different sense were privately given U.S. officials later). Even Ali Jawdat Ayoubi, the first Iraqi premier to visit Syria in eight years, took the road to Damascus to assure the junta that it could count on Iraq's "neighborly solidarity and support" so long as it did not interfere with the free flow of Iraqi oil across Syria. To round off the show, Colonel Nasser accused Washington of creating an uproar over Syria in order to divert Arab attention and establish American domination over the Near East.

Fortified by this support, and by assurances from King Saud and the Iraqi premier that his junta was in no real danger of American, Turkish, Hashemite or, so far as they knew, any other form of attack or subversion, General Bizri went ahead whipping up ultra-nationalist frenzy both inside Syria and throughout the Arabic-speaking Near East. Damascus radio intensified its anti-Hussein campaign, very soon followed by Cairo's open calls for assassination. Syrian-sponsored subversion and sabotage recurred in Lebanon as well as Jordan.

Damascus, the junta spokesmen proclaimed, was once more "the capital of true Arabism . . . the nerve center of the Arabs' emancipatory struggle." This in turn annoyed King Saud. He had been brought scurrying back from the waters of Baden-Baden, to proclaim his solidarity with Syria, by a report that an influential group of his royal brothers and cousins would oppose Saudi acquiescence in whatever measures Washington might be contemplating to unseat the Syrian junta. Spokesmen for the Dhahran oil workers had let it be known that in the event of an American-sponsored coup Aramco installations would be sabotaged. But Bizri was going too far. Saud dispatched a reminder to Damascus that Hussein was now, to some extent, his protégé, and offered to "mediate" between Syria and Turkey. The Turks and Syria's worried, ulcer-nursing President Kuwatli accepted; Bizri turned him down, and junta propagandists began slating Saud, too, to the Levant's uninhibited delight, for attempting to sneak out on the defense of Syria's sacred Arab cause.

Colonel Nasser, on the contrary, scored a propagandist victory as valuable as it was inexpensive by landing some 1,500 Egyptian troops at Lattakia. Stationed for the most part within easy reach of Aleppo, the Shaabist stronghold, their main utility from Bizri's point of view, too, was propagandist and to exert additional restraint on the junta's internal opponents. Cairo radio's claim that their presence made a decisive difference to Syria's ability to resist the Turks raised even Syrian smiles.

WHAT is the background to all this potter? The Russians would undoubtedly like to achieve the total liquidation of Western influence and interests in the Near East. Failing this, their aim seems to be (in the short run) U.S. recognition of their claim to membership of the Near Eastern geopolitical club—possibly with a view to negotiating a global Russo-American deal in which assets might well be bartered or otherwise balanced at some future date. In the meantime they seem eager to make

Syria their Near Eastern shop window (much as Beirut has in recent years become a shop window for a Levantinized version of American values and the free-enterprise way of life). They are certainly determined not to suffer any further setbacks of the kind inflicted on them last year as a result of Colonel Nasser's clumsy, premature provocation of the British, French, and Israelis. It is possible that they saw the seeds of such a setback germinating first in the Hashemites' vague plans for sorting out Syria, and then, more dangerously, in the Henderson mission and subsequent careless talk in Washington during the first week of September. The Arab governments' nervous reaction against what they, too, took to be the trend of U. S. policy gave the Russians the opening they needed to pose as the champions of an Arab state's right to govern itself as it might wish. With eager Syrian cooperation, they then proceeded to boost Syrian-Turkish mistrust to intercontinental proportions. Significantly, once the Syrian-Soviet economic agreement (which gives Russia a seven-year stranglehold on Syria's economy) was safely concluded, both Syrian and Soviet charges against Turkey and America faded out, though lest the change appear too abrupt, the Damascus junta raised two or three minor scares during the first half of November.

On the whole, the operation was a profitable one for Russia, while her Syrian friends have greatly strengthened their position. By "Syrian friends," it is important to stress, one does not mean out-and-out Communists. The Kremlin's preference for working in the Near East with and through rootless "nationalists," in particular such ideological orphans as the adherents of the Levantine "National Socialist" movements (most of them ex-Fascist or Fascist-inspired), has again been demonstrated. The orthodox Syrian Communists, who, inspired by Stalinist precedents in Central Europe, last summer began preparing the ground for a purge of the opposition Shaabists (who have sometimes collaborated with them in the past) and a series of administrative measures in-

tended to replace several of their Ba'ath allies by Communist party stalwarts, were ordered to stop being silly: the order is reliably reported to have sent Syrian Communist party secretary Khaled Begdash—a natty, intelligent Kurdish member of parliament—into an outsize huff. Yet the soundness of Mr. Solod's instinct—for it is Russia's former ambassador to Syria who is credited with this particular bit of common sense—is indicated by the extent to which the Shaabists have now rallied to the junta's support, in order to resist what one of their leaders, Dr. Maarouf ed-Dawalibi, has denounced as "colonialist intrigue." Dawalibi, a former "Islamic socialist" and before that a professional pro-Nazi propagandist, is even toying with the idea of Shaabist participation in the government coalition—if, as has been mooted, the coalition extends an invitation. Such participation would be a pure formality—it would not alter the composition of the Bizri-Serraj junta, where effective power resides—but it might renovate the regime's flaking constitutional façade.

There is no need to take an overly tragic view of America's involvement in the Syrian uproar. The U. S. government has, after all, been afforded a fresh opportunity of digesting the facts of Near Eastern life. It has been reminded once more that in the Arab world, arms supplies contribute to chaos rather than strength and that their recipients desire them not for defense against "international Communism" (whatever Washington means by that phrase) but for possible use against Israel. It has received a

spectacular but salutary demonstration of the basic unreliability of the Arab countries it had tranquilized itself into considering as cold-war allies. Presumably it is thankful that the demonstration was not reserved for some more perilous occasion.

At the same time, one cannot help wondering why official Washington insists on acquiring enlightenment the hard way. Has no one in the State Department ever prepared for Secretary Dulles a paper analyzing the Near Eastern experiences of successive British governments from 1945 on? These were the fruits of a delusion fundamentally similar to his—that Near Eastern stability can be insured by bolstering up the region's more plausible oligarchies and buying their good will with arms and, where necessary, subsidies. And—to probe no further back than last June—did no one on his staff read the communiqué issued jointly by Kings Saud and Hussein (but keynoted by Saud) after their talks in Amman? This advertised amply the slippery Saudi monarch's talent for temporization, and ought to have warned the Eisenhower administration never to stick its neck anywhere within reach of his chopper—as it did on Syria.

The Eisenhower Doctrine is now as extinct as the dodo. Since everyone realizes that it was aimed at the U. S. Congress rather than the Kremlin, tears for its demise are few. Levantine observers are more concerned to wonder what new gimmick Mr. Dulles will spring. Or could he be reflecting that there might be a difference between salesmanship and statesmanship after all?